NIRAM

A DUSKY IDYL

by

LAISDELL MITCHELL

Vera B. Hyde.

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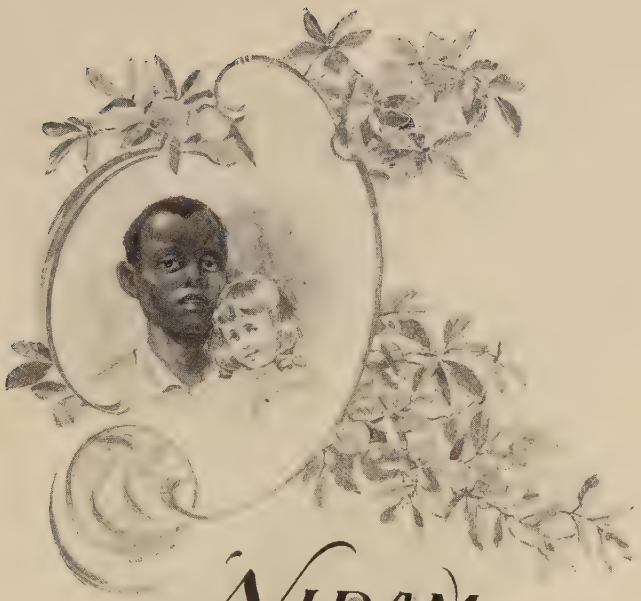
"On the wide veranda,"
Page 11.



NIRAM

A DUSKY IDYL

BY

LAISDELL MITCHELL
AUTHOR OF TONY.

PHILADELPHIA
CHARLES H. BANES
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I

A Southern Home

"Softly the evening came. The sun from the western horizon
Like a magician extended his golden wand o'er the landscape;
Twinkling vapors arose, and sky, and water, and forest,
Seemed all on fire at the touch, and melted and mingled together."

Longfellow.

THE air was clear and soft, and the low, crooning melody of a dusky mother penetrated the sunset splendor. The fading day had been one of nature's choicest, and it was a joy to rest, with absolutely nothing to do, on the wide veranda of this Southern home.

As far as eye could reach stretched the estate. To the left, standing in stately guard, were the tall, sweet-scented

Florida pines, with their crests swaying majestically in the light evening breeze. In the distance could be seen, like a rift in the clouds, the glimmer of the lagoon as the sun tenderly kissed the water good-night. To my right, as I idly enjoyed my pipe in a cosy corner, were the cabins of the colored people. Many of these had been ruined "when the North and the South had parted," but were now completely rebuilt and made pleasantly habitable by the general, who insisted that the people would give better work when well housed and fed.

The general had purchased the Island some time during the early eighties, when it was in a most forlorn and unpromising condition; since then he had spared neither pains, thought, nor money to render it a model plantation in every respect.

His efforts on their behalf, as well as in the improvement of the property, were most thoroughly appreciated by the blacks, who thought no work or trouble too great to take for "de gen'al."

The house too had undergone repairs, and was now restored to its former attractiveness as an old-fashioned manor of the true, rambling, erratic, Southern style. It bore distinct traces of the varying taste of the many generations which had added to and enlarged the original structure. Each one of the rooms was large, bright, and cheery. No modern dust-distributing furnace-openings disfigured the walls, but hospitable grate fires bade the guest a pleasant welcome and gave additional charm to the surrounding quaintness. All the furniture, which

was solid, generous, and stable, had been re-polished and was again in use. The hard-wood floors were covered with treasured rugs, fairly hoary with beauty-increasing age.

Almost every one of the oldest rooms possessed a secret panel, oddly carved, as were indeed, all the others, and many were their conjectured usages. In some of these hiding-places had been stored the rugs; in others were found quaint, old-time silver, blackened with age; in one or two some old family portraits had been discovered, bearing the name of Holbein or Van Dyck, and in the darkest part of another recess, was found, in an old cedar chest, a complete dinner set of almost priceless "grape" porcelain.

In one, which was indeed, hardly more than a box, being but fourteen inches square, was an

old letter, falling apart from the very weight of its own yellowness, bearing the misty date of "1724," which had been discovered and deciphered but a few days before my arrival. Near it was lying a ring holding a rare jewel set in the dull gold. Within could be read the faint shadows of the words "Amor omnia vincit." But the little ring was silent, and sacredly treasured its life-story, made sweeter by the memory of the love of long ago.

Here and there the armorial bearings of the first settlers told their story of a brave and determined ancestry. In a few places was carved the crest,—two displayed wings, each bearing a corrugated sickle,—and in dim, old-time lettering could be read the suggestive motto, "Ich woll."

Altogether it was an ideal retreat from the

busy life of the world in which to restfully while away the hours as they vanished in the ever-flowing glass, and to watch the sun radiantly disappear without taking any "thought for the morrow."

Not the least attraction was the pastoral simplicity of the life. Few class distinctions annoyed the help, but the blacks enjoyed many unaccustomed privileges, and in their turn readily responded to any wish of the general. Each family had its own cabin, and was as well taken care of as had been the more fortunate slaves before the war, and yet reveled in the freedom bequeathed to them in the immortal sixty-three. When the toil for the day was over, and the evening repast enjoyed, in front of many cabins would be gathered little groups, while the air would be filled with the half-monotonous melodies

in which the heart of the Negro so delights. The banjo and the "hoe-down" played no unimportant part, for the happy, shallow Negro nature thought of little except to extract the most from the present.

In the cabin nearest the manor, behind a wide-spreading magnolia tree, lived two old blacks with their grandson, Ad'niram Ju'son. They had been carried into slavery from the happy freedom of Africa, and still bore the numerical names bestowed upon them as they had been marched from the hold of the slave-ship. Many were the tales of horror they could relate of that never-to-be-forgotten journey, but which they determinedly kept from others, for the recital could be of no use and would only harrow feelings to no purpose.

"Sextus" never could forget that "befo' de wah, sah," he had been "Massa's conf'dential man, sah," nor did he hesitate to regale the general with bits of his own wisdom, "in season and out of season." His nearly every remark was prefaced by the only quotation he had ever learned, but the source of which I was never able to ascertain, "Times an' tides waits fo' no man, sah."

"Prima," his wife, was in delighted charge of the culinary department. Her skill was never doubted, either in cooking or singing, and in the former had indeed passed almost into a proverb among the younger black women, who aspired to nothing better than to cook like Aunt Prima.

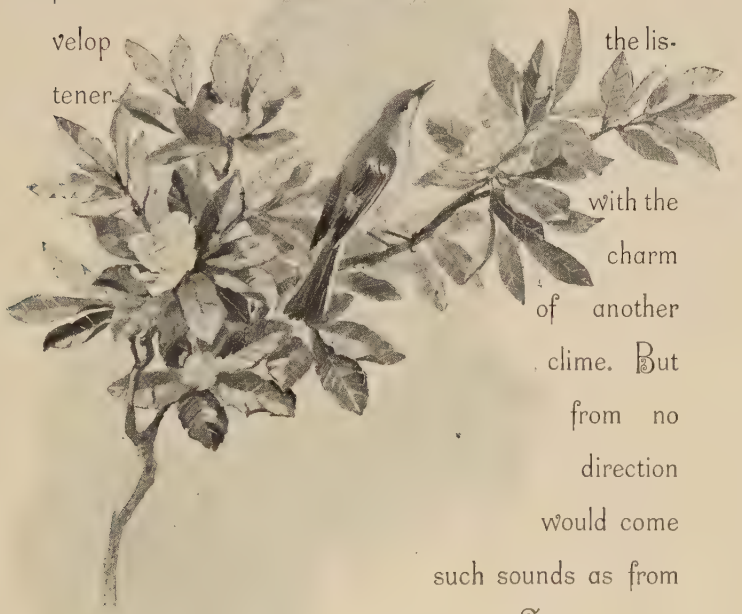
The grandson was a child of much love and sorrow. His mother's life had been the guerdon

for his; and ere two moons had passed over the little Negro, his father, one of the bright, stalwart, skilled overseers, succumbed to cramps in the glittering, shimmering bay, and the babe neither knew nor realized its loss.

Niram was an individual lad; gentle, brave, patient, and always cheerful, he was a great favorite with his people, who are distinctively creatures of sunshine. At the age of five, when alive with the strength of childhood, an injury to that most wonderful of possessions, the spinal column, had prevented him from walking. The available local skill had done nothing for him, and thus the years had been passed in helplessness. But in spite of his sufferings he was the light and sunshine of not only his own home, but of many near it. With a determination far beyond his

station and years, he seldom permitted himself to express his pain in the presence of others, and not even his grandmother, who loved him so, appreciated the extent of his suffering and consequent bravery. His eyes were soft and lustrous and black; the features were molded after the Caucasian, and possessed a contour of refinement which was in strange incongruity with his humble surroundings. He had a receptive intellect, and Miss Dorothy, the general's youngest daughter, discovering this, as well as his intense desire to learn, had been spending some of her unoccupied time, since her return from college, teaching him, that the time might not pass quite so slowly. He intuitively understood and appreciated her intention, and with all the energy of his years applied himself to his studies with flattering progress.

In the evening the weird, lingering melodies from the cabins would envelop the listener with the charm of another clime. But from no direction would come such sounds as from the home of Sextus; for there, when the angel lamps were twinkling into sight, and the trill of the nightingale lent its charm to

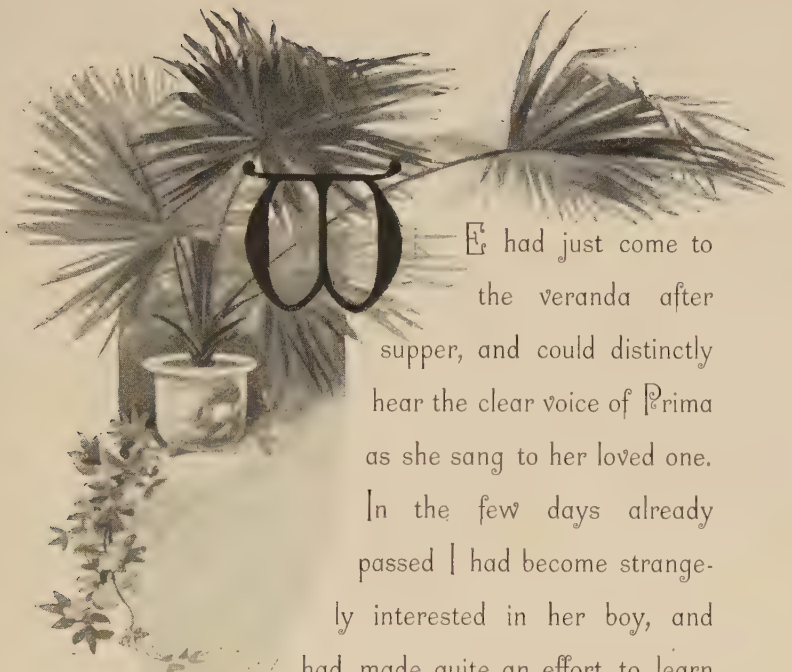


the half silence, Prima, with her little lad in her capacious arms, would sit and sing, with all the fervor of her great mother-love, and the abandon of the true Negro to the seductiveness of sound. Her song could easily be heard on the veranda, and the voices of the other singers made a pleasant accompaniment. Above all things else she loved the weird, minor strains, and often would she be joined in her singing by Niram, whose voice was a sweet, clear contralto. Seldom could he be persuaded to sing alone, but nevertheless, he possessed, locked safely in its ebony casket, that rare treasure—the power of intelligent, sympathetic singing. In him was combined in a truly wonderful manner the crooning, rhythmic power of his people, and the pure, accurate, pleasure-giving tones of the whites.

II

A Melodious Night

"Sweetest melodies
Are those that are by distance made more sweet."
Wordsworth.



WE had just come to the veranda after supper, and could distinctly hear the clear voice of Prima as she sang to her loved one. In the few days already passed I had become strangely interested in her boy, and had made quite an effort to learn all concerning him and his injury that was possible. I instinctively felt, without any ground for belief, that in some way I should be permitted to relieve him. My life for many years had been spent among children, in the endeavor to alleviate their sufferings, and I desired

to test my alleged skill on Niram. My own boy Tony, who had whistled himself into my heart, was then at school, and I was with the general in response to a most urgent invitation to come down for a fortnight's shooting, in which the Island abounded.

The air, I remember, was very still that evening, sweet and fragrantly transparent, and the general, with the party of merry young people, had gathered on the other side of the house, and comparatively speaking, I was alone, with my pipe and thoughts of the little black, the protégé of Miss Dorothy—than whom a sweeter girl never lived.

While thus musing I was suddenly recalled to my immediate surroundings by hearing, rising round and full, in strong, rich cadenzas, above

the low monotone of the blacks' singing, in a voice of rare sweetness and power, but untrained, the words:

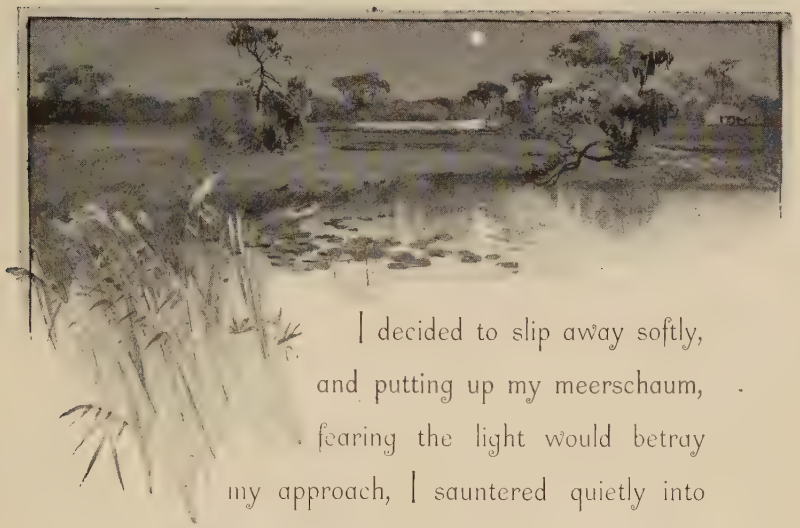
"'Way down upon de Suwannee Ribber,
Far, far, 'way,
Dere's whar my heart am turnin' eber,
Dere's whar de ole folks stay.

"All up an' down de whole creation,
Sadly I roam,
Still longin' fur de old plantation,
An' fur de ole folks at home.

"All de worl' am sad an' dreary,
Eb'rywhar I roam,
Oh, darkies, how my heart grows weary,
Far f'om de ole folks at home."

I bent forward to listen closely. As I did not at once recognize the voice I concluded that it must be some visitor at one of the cabins. Just whence the sound came I could not immediately determine, and while wondering, like the bubbling of happy waters came the rollicking sounds of—

"I hab a yarn I wants ter tell,
Amo, emo, imo, we,
'Bout de boy dat rang de bell,
Amo, emo, imo, we.
He rang de bell wid all his might,
An' den he vanished out ob sight!
We heerd him a singin'
As he went frough de air—
Amo, emo, imo, we,
Dis 's de las' you'll see ob me."



I decided to slip away softly, and putting up my meerschaum, fearing the light would betray my approach, I sauntered quietly into the dusk, seeking the shelter of the magnolia row, as it led toward the cabins.

The night, as I well remember, was truly one of surpassing beauty. Luna rode in majestic loveliness across the sapphire vault above, and in her train, like courtiers to a queen, were myriads of sparkling satellites. Even as I looked a meteor fell athwart the beauty, and the superst-

tion of the blacks recurred to me, as almost unconsciously, I murmured, "God pity him." For you must know, that at sight of a falling star they most firmly believe some soul is winging its way into the unknown—not the bright, glorious Hereafter, but the dark, tortuous paths of the Blackness, and they say, or think, "God pity him."

"De moon am brightly shinin',
De stars am in de sky;
De mawkin'-bird am singin'
De 'gator am bery nigh.
Re, ro, ri, rum, fol de rol;
Tra la la, tra la lol;
Re, ro, ri, rum, fol de rol,
Tra la la, tra la lol."

The chorus suddenly ceased, for many lips were, I knew, saying the little prayer for the departing one, whose path was thus marked as we gazed. In the stillness of the night, from among the pines whose fragrance scented the air, rose the song of the nightingale. And who, having heard, has not stood entranced when listening to the melody poured so lavishly forth from this least attractive of nature's songsters. Nowhere is sweetness so vocal, or melody so bewitching, as in the early evening of the tropics, when the very earth-sounds are hushed in expectancy of this solo, and the air is heavy with the perfume of the foliage. Here, indeed, man believes he must be nearer God than he ever can be in the still, cold, unexpressive North—where nature shows her charms but for a short season,

reserving her rarest jewels to be displayed in the heart of the always-summer-land, where, if anywhere in the world, the "Fountain of Eternal Youth" ought surely to be found.

A moment after the roundelay was completed from the dimness near me came the old favorite of Negro and White alike:

"I'm dreamin' now ob Hallie,
Sweet Hallie, sweet Hallie,
I'm dreamin' now ob Hallie,
Fur de thought ob her am one
dat neber dies.
She's sleepin' in de valley,
De valley, de valley,
An' de mawkin'-bird am singin'
whar she lies.

"Listen ter de mawkin'-bird,
Listen ter de mawkin'-bird,
De mawkin'-bird still singin' o'er
her grabe.
Listen ter de mawkin'-bird,
Listen ter de mawkin'-bird,
Still singin' whar de weepin'
willows wabe."

Hardly had the last clear note died away ere the deep tones of Sextus' voice were heard in admonition:

"'Times an' tides wait fur no man,' Niram——"

Unheeding, and interrupting this prelude to an utterance of wisdom, the sprightly voice continued:

"De 'gator calls me ober in de 'goon;
I sees his eyes by de light ob de moon.
I guess he's hollow an' wants his dinner—
But he don' get a bit ob dis yere sinner!
Fur I'se all right——"

"Niram, my lad, I really t'inks dat——"

"I'm de happy, happy daddy ob a coon:
Eyes like diamonds, teeth like pearls,
An' dose little, dinky curls.
Little han's an' little feet,
Oh, I tells you my darlin's sweet!
I'm de happy, happy daddy ob a coon!"

Sextus laughed. He could not help it, and his mirth was contagious. However, he once more began on the interrupted sentence:

"You had jes' better go ter sleep, fur——"

"My lub's brack ez she kin be,
An' she t'inks a heap ob me.
Dancin' eyes an' corkscrew curls,
Make her jes' de bes' ob gurls!
Oh, Lizbeth Ann, I lubs you!
Oh, Lizbeth Ann, I lubs you!
Set de day an' I'll be dar,
Fur, Lizbeth Ann, I lubs you!"

Many of Niram's ditties, of which he possessed a well-nigh inexhaustible supply, were, as I afterward learned, peculiar to the Negroes of the Island. Nowhere else through the Southland have I ever heard them sung. Strange as they were at first, frequent repetition soon familiarized me with them. And, even now, by closing eyes

and ears to the surrounding influences, I can easily imagine myself back among the melodies and aromas of the Island.

The old man was almost worsted, but pertinaciously determined to complete his sentence, like the famous Herr Meyer. The intervals of song had no apparent effect upon its original structure, for he proceeded, unmoved:

"—— I don't wants you ter sing any mo' ter-night."

Softly, sweetly, like a passing breath, came the words, gaining gradually in volume as the melody rolled on:

"I'm trabelin' bac' ter Dixie,
My step am slow an' feeble;
I prays de Lor' ter help me,
An' keep me f'om all ebil.

An' should my strength forsake me,
Den kin' friends cum an' tak' me,
My heart's turned bac' ter Dixie,
An' I mus' go.

"I'se gwine bac' ter Dixie,
I'se gwine bac' ter Dixie,
I'se gwine whar de orange blossoms grow.
Fur I hears de chillen callin',
I see de sad tears fallin',
My heart's turned bac' ter Dixie,
An' I mus' go."

For a moment old Sextus was silenced, for this was his acknowledged favorite. But his love was strong in his determination to do what he considered was best for his boy.

"What's de matta wid you, Niram, dis night? Don' you know you mus'n't sing so much. What would Massa Doc say if he done heard you singin' now, when you wouldn't sing fur him de t'other day?"

"Oh, gran'pap, jus' one mo' song, 'fo' I goes ter bed. It's de only time I kin sing, when nobody knows who I is. Jus' one, gran'pap, please."

Sextus was no more proof against the wiles of the one he loved than are others, and with a half-grunt, as much as to say, "Well, ef you will hev your way, hev it!" he returned to the solace of his corn-cob and patiently waited the boy's will.

Then rose the minor tones, full of sweetness and with the echo of tears in them:

"Oh, de days am long an' dreary,
My life am sad an' weary,
I'm waitin' fur de Massa
Ter cum fur me.
He'll tak' me home ter glory,
Yah, de Massa will!
He'll tak' me home ter glory,
Up de golden hill!"

A silence followed the singing, unbroken for a few moments until the glorious, inimitable trill of the nightingale soared aloft from among the pines.

"Now, gran'pap, I'se ready. Take me in, please," came the words from Niram, and the voice was tired and lifeless, while I thought I detected pain in the tones. Then I knew why

he had sung so much—he was fighting! And he was victorious, but at the expense of nearly all his reserve strength. My heart warmed toward the little black lad for his bravery, and after all, the color of the skin makes no difference in blood or feelings, and Niram was a hero, in that he conquered an intangible but all-powerful foe.

III

Niram

"*. . . From a humble cottage a hero often springs.*"

Latin Proverb.

NEXT morning, after the "Eloise" had departed with her merry freight, I sauntered toward the cabin. Sextus had gone with the general and one or two of the men to hunt 'gators in the lagoon, which contained a full supply of every size, color, and temper, and proved a never-failing source of interest. Prima, as I knew, was in the manor, concocting many

and luscious dainties for the eager palates on their return in the evening. Niram, then, would be all alone, and we could have a pleasant little time together. And so I thought it a good time to see him and perhaps find out if I could help him.

Crossing the threshold I saw him lying on the improvised easy-chair, with his back toward the door, reading a recently acquired copy of "Zig-zag Journeys." Every now and then a smile, half-sad, and yet not at all dissatisfied, crept over his face. He had not heard my entrance, and for a moment or two I silently watched his reflection in the small mirror. Apparently having finished a chapter, he closed the book, with a little sigh, and began singing, in a sweet, plaintive undertone:

"He closed the book . . . and began to sing."
Page 44.

"Den, oh, I'se er-comin'! I kin hear de watah flow—
I'se er-comin' dough I'se ole an' lame an' po',
Fur dere's nuffin' lack de joy, lack de sorrer,
dat I know,
In de cabin by de Massysippi sho'."

Intuitively feeling that the lad was blue I resolved to interrupt his train of sad thoughts. Quietly slipping outside I began to whistle the first old college song that came to my memory, walking briskly into the room a moment later. The effect was even as I had hoped, and the little, black face brightened visibly, while the voice, speaking very slow in the effort to be correct, said:

"Oh, doctor, how glad I is that you have come. I was a-gettin' very lonesome."

"What have you been reading, Niram?"

"One of the 'Zig-zag' books. Miss Dor'thy loaned it to me t'other day. I like them all pretty well, an' the people too. 'specially Tom. Don't you, doctor?"

The effect of Miss Dorothy's patient teaching was plainly visible in the lad's endeavor to avoid the patois of his people, however much he might speak like them when among them.

"Yes, I do. Tony has been reading them aloud during his last visit home and insists that some day, when he is through school, we two shall travel everywhere, just as they did."

"How scrumptious! But he kin go whar he pleases now! It mus' be awful nice to walk an' run like the other boys do," and a quickly suppressed sigh parted his lips.

"By the way, Niram, did I ever tell you

what Tony says they sometimes have for breakfast at school?"

"No, sah."

"'Heaven and earth and shoe-blacking!'"

The large eyes fairly stretched their amazement as the lad gasped:

"Dat so?"

"Yes. Those are the boys' names for apples, fried potatoes, and coffee."

"Well, I rather guess they nebber had none o' Grandmam Prima's cookin'—did they, doctor?"

"No, indeed, or they would never have thought of such names."

"Grandmam says she's gwine to have 'heavenly hash' fur lunch to-day."

It was my turn to be nonplussed.

"'Heavenly hash?'"

"Yes, sah," and Niram laughed heartily. "I won't tell you what it are, but you will fin' out after a while."

"Niram, you think as other boys do, even if you do not play ball and run and jump, as they do; now what is your idea of a hero? Most boys have one, and I want to know yours."

He was silent a few moments. His hands lay listlessly holding the book, and his eyes wandered over the pleasant vista seen through the window. From the distance came the mellowed sound of men's voices as they sang at their work. But Niram, utterly oblivious to his surroundings, was evidently thinking deeply. When he spoke, it was very slowly, and as one who weighed every word, lapsing more and more, as he proceeded, into the dialect of his people.

"I t'ink dat a hero should be brave an' strong an' good, an' if he ever has any pain to keep it to hisself, like the boy Miss Dor'thy was tellin' me 'bout t'other day. He was a boy-hero, I t'ink. An' then he ought to help people, pe'ticula'ly ole people, an' —— But, oh, doctah, why does you ask me dis, fur I kin nebber do anyt'ing, 'cept, p'raps, not tell grandmam when de pain am very bad! Ef I was only strong an' well, an' even ef I is black, doctah, I would try ter do, oh, so much good. I would do like 'Great-heart' did, an' de giant, who was renamed 'Christopher.' Yah," and his voice was low, as he added, giving his testimony to a new hope recently born within him, "I would try ter be mo' like de Massa Christ, fur he was de very bes' hero. An' he nebber t'ought ob hisself."

"What would you say if I were to tell you that you could be a hero?"

"Oh, doctah," and the lad fairly quivered in his pleasure, while his eyes sparkled with a new light, as I continued:

"Do you remember Nanning Koppezoon, and how brave he was?"

"Yes, sah. Miss Dor'thy tol' me 'bout him t'other day. He was another hero."

"And do you remember the story of how the general—our general—saved his regimental colors during the war, when he was but a mere boy, by crawling along the ditch right under the fire of the enemy?"

"Yes, sah," wonderingly.

"And have you forgotten what I told you the other day, that Miss Dorothy never said one

word when the painful operation was performed upon her eyes, when she was a very little girl?"

"No, sah," and the eyes grew big with the light of a dawning hope, while the lips became tense, and the hands were strained in their grasp, each of the other.

"And do you think of any one you know, who is ill or deformed, who would be willing to undergo a great deal of pain, if he was told he would be well and straight afterward?"

There was no vocal reply to this question, but the gleam in the eyes told of a great resolve being born within the ebony casket—in the heart where the blood was as rich and strong as that of one born to the purple.

"And now, listen carefully; would you be willing to let me examine your back—it may hurt

you a little, or perhaps a very, very great deal—and see if I think anything could be done for you? You know that I will be as careful as possible,"

"When, doctah?"

"And you will not say one word to Prima or Sextus about it until I give you permission?"

"No, sah."

"Then I think I will make the examination at once.'

"I t'ink, Massa Doctah," and the words came very slowly and softly, "dat I kin bar anyt'ing now!"

As I turned toward the bad to arrange it, like a clarion cry, strong and clear and ringing, came the couplet:

"It mus' be now de Kingdom's comin'—
An' de yar ob Jubilo!"

Then there followed silence, broken only by the hum of the song of the far-distant workers.

The difficulty, I soon learned, was caused by muscular contraction, and could be easily, though painfully, remedied. Reporting this fact to Niram, his reply was characteristic:

"Jus' as you say, Massa Doctah. I'se willin'. I'se gwine ter be brave, even ef de misery do come. An' ef de good Massa wants ter hev me now, I'se ready ter go. An' ef I gets well —"

Quietly the preparations progressed for the operation, and one or two physicians from the nearest city were invited to assist me. Prima and Sextus were still kept in ignorance of our plan, in accord with the decision reached by the general. Niram was quietly happy, while

a new gleam lurked in his eyes, and his joy would often burst from his lips in the melodies of his people.

When the eventful morning arrived, after the "Eloise" had steamed away for my confreres, I told Prima that Niram would spend the day with me, and then, sauntering out, I neared the cabin.

Floating through the magnolias came the wordless melody of a wild, old African chant, brought from her birthland by Prima and taught to Niram. The minor tones held a strange, insinuating sadness, like the low-voiced moaning of the women as their warriors—fathers, husbands, brothers, sons, lovers—assembled for the last time before going to battle. Almost imperceptibly the sound grew stronger, and its tenor changed, while

the regular tramp of the men, the discords of the tam-tams, and the screech of the white owl—their bird of good omen—could be detected as they passed on into the distance and out of sight. A confused dissonance, sullen, threatening, and awe-inspiring, suggested the echo of the far-off battle din. Above this was heard one solitary note of triumph, followed by a weird pœan, which rang forth clear, sharp, shrill, and almost demoniacal in its fierce, intense, but wordless, expression of joy. Through the return march, inseparably interwoven with the strange, exultant chorus, rose the mourners' wail for those left lying in their last sleep on the field of carnage. As they neared the village the women caught up the strain, mingling their moaning with the funeral chords, and thus making a sombre accompaniment, at

great variance with the strong, strange, jubilant tones as the tribe chorused its valor. With the fortissimo shout of victory the voice abruptly ceased, and the scene created by the mystic power of the barbaric cantata, suddenly dissolved, and sweet and low and witchingly harmonious, came the distant song of the simply decked queen of the Southern night.

Niram was tenderly borne to my room, and his eyes were very happy, while his face was strangely passive. A moment or so later, while we were yet alone, and I was busy with my case, like a half whisper, I heard him say:

"Dear Massa Jesus, you knows who I is, an' what a wuthless little boy I is, an' how much I wants ter do suthin'. Massa Doctah says he kin cure me. Dear Massa Jesus,

please let him do dat t'ing so ez I kin do suthin' fur you. An' dear Massa Jesus, please help Niram ter be brave. I wants so much ter be strong an' well. Dat's all. Amen."

At last, the operation over,—and it was longer than we had anticipated, and much more painful, but never a word, groan, or murmur was allowed to escape from the firmly set lips,—Niram was placed in a plaster cast, in which he was to remain between two and three months, under the watchful care of my colleague, Dr. Kimball.

Two months later I boarded the staunch old "Gate City" and sailed for the Island.

Thin, and very weak, but straight, perfectly straight, Niram when released was able to take

a step or so alone, and then slipping back into his chair he sang clearly, softly, worshipfully, Heber's beautiful hymn:

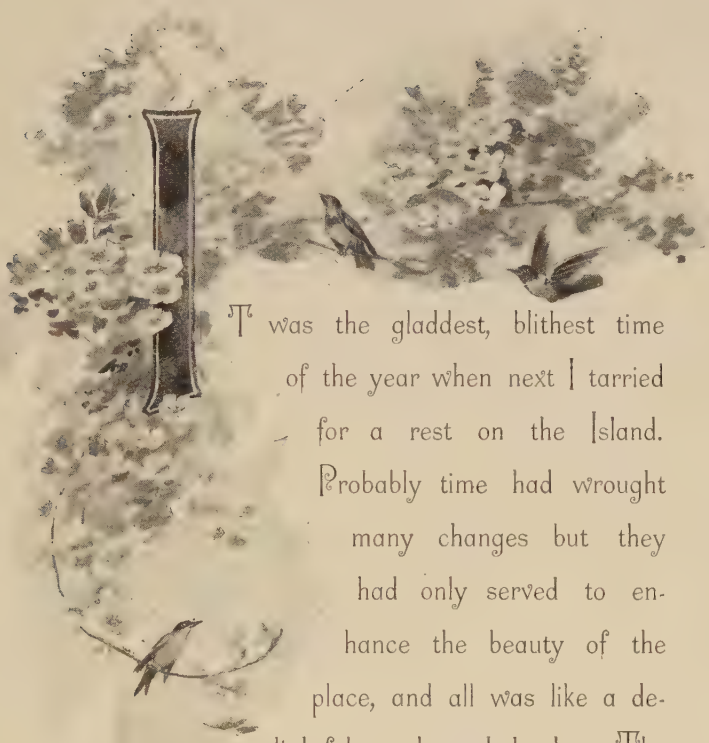
"Holy, holy, holy. Lor' God Almighty!
Early in de mawnin' my song shall rise ter thee;
Holy, holy, holy, mercifu' an' mighty!
God in three persons, blessed Trinity!"

IV

A Hero

". . . A lad of metal, a good boy."

Shakespeare.



IT was the gladdest, blithest time of the year when next I tarried for a rest on the Island. Probably time had wrought many changes but they had only served to enhance the beauty of the place, and all was like a delightful, enchanted land. The magnolias were in rich, luxurious bloom; the air was heavy with the fragrance of the orange blossoms, and each day invited one to revel in the "dolce far niente" of the tropics.

The circle in the manor had changed, growing

ever more attractive and complete, while Miss Dorothy now responded to a sweetly lisped "mamma" from a petite, happy maiden whom we called Gladys. The general was as argumentative as ever, believed as firmly in the future of the Republican party, still religiously read the New York "Tribune." and stooped a trifle more, which made me feel that we were both able to review many more summers than in our hearts, boyish yet in many ways, we cared to acknowledge. His keen, blue eyes twinkled as of yore, and the fierce mustachios could not quite hide the full, merry lips, almost womanish in their delicate, high-bred outlines.

Prima and Sextus, with the dignity befitting their advanced age, dictated to their little court from the veranda-throne. Sextus' time was

about evenly divided between a love of exerting authority, and the laborious spelling out of the words of his Testament. Prima was an excellent example of what wives should be in submitting to their husbands' authority, and never presumed to differ from the expressed sentiments of her other half, except in the culinary realm, and there she brooked neither suggestion nor rival.

Niram, older grown, was now, as ever, the joy and pride of these old people, who conversed eloquently and untiringly of him. In their eyes his observations were doubly refined wisdom, his wishes laws. He held the position once occupied by his father, and filled it most satisfactorily. Moreover, he was a natural leader, although in no wise a dictator, and possessed a peculiar, beneficial influence over his people, but retained withal, a

remarkably pure and guileless Christian character; sweet, yet strong; noble, yet humble; willing to be less than the least, but unswerving in his principles, and firm in his advocacy of the truth.

In the softness of the fading light as we were enjoying the veranda, the words floated toward us, and although years had elapsed I recognized the voice of Niram, as he sang one of his boyish favorites:

"I'se a happy, happy, niggah boy!
I plays all de day;
I sleeps all de night
An' wakes up wid de mawnin' light."

The dusk hid him from my sight and a moment later the singing died away into silence.

Little Gladys, the daintiest, quaintest of maidens was an object of deep and solicitous interest during her daily trip to "Shut-eye Town." The fairies of that realm were ever anxious to lure her

to their homes and the nurse must ever be on the alert to intercept their fascinations and restrain them from leading her into danger. Fortunately her strange guides had never so led her as yet, confining their wiles to the afternoon nap, doubtless because they too rested at night; but the constant vigilance was never relaxed.

The nursery was a comparatively new addition to the house and extended on to the edge

of the veranda roof, around which ran a slight, ornamental cornice. Over this, adding much to the picturesqueness of the home, clustered the graceful clematis and wistaria. This slight projection was a favorite resting-place for the doves, and many bright-tinted humming birds made their nests among the vines. The general had once or twice remarked that the cornice needed strengthening, owing to the gradually increasing weight of the vines, but nothing had as yet been done toward that end.

One afternoon, a few days later, as he and I were watching a sharply contested game of tennis, my attention was attracted toward the house, and I saw a small, white-robed figure emerging from the window, and stand erect on the cornice. The curls swayed gently in the

breeze, and the small hands hung easily at her sides, as she took one step and then another and another.

It all took place so quickly that I hardly knew what to do. No one appeared to notice the little maid but myself. When awake, Gladys was rather timid, and to see her walking on the frail cornice, at such a dizzy height, sent a thrill through me, for I knew not what moment she might awaken, and I dared not think of the possible consequences. Where could Chloe be?

But even as I questioned within myself, a light, active, figure bounded across the lawn and entered the house. A moment later Niram's head appeared at the window, but as he measured the height with his eyes, he drew back. The small figure moved on step by step. Through

Niram's brain rushed the thought of the weakness of the cornice on which the child was walking. It bore her weight safely, would it bear his? Never mind, he must get Miss Gladys ere she wakened, for she would surely be frightened and fall and——— And yet, if he did venture out, might not—would he not fall? and thus two lives would be sacrificed. A fall from there to the ground would mean either deformity for life—and he knew well, oh, so well, what helplessness was—or death. Could he venture? Did he consider his life as worth more than that of the child—he, a poor, black man? And the general had done so much for him. Yes, he would, must, go, and suiting the action to the word, he drew himself slowly out of the window, but his courage failed him, and

he crouched back, quivering with fear. Then he saw Gladys. She had nearly reached the

corner where the cornice ended, and forgetting his own imminent danger and the risk he was

hazarding, he began to hum a dreamy, crooning, rhythmic, wordless lullaby—one of Gladys' particular favorites. The sound penetrated to the consciousness of the child, and she paused. With a few quick, noiseless steps Niram was near her, still softly singing. Gladys turned, and extending her arms as she always did when wishing to be taken up, opened her eyes, into which fright leaped with rapid strides. Niram caught her ere she realized where she was, and seemed hardly to touch the cornice as he bore her to the window where Chloe stood.

If, as the poet sings, "Time is counted by heart-throbs," we who watched the courageous deed, and the return of the lithe figure with its precious burden along the giddy height of the roof, lived cycles in those few moments.

As Gladys was handed to her nurse a loud cry of delight, relief, and joy burst from us all. But it was quickly changed to one of horror, for even as Niram released his hold on the child, the cornice could no longer bear the strain, and breaking, precipitated him backward!

Almost simultaneously we all rushed forward, fearing the worst. Fortunately, nay, providentially, a large magnolia tree—the pride of the general's heart—caught him and thus broke his fall, and saved him from almost certain death. Many eager, willing hands quickly extricated him, and every voice hailed him as a hero.

For a few seconds he stood erect and silent, hardly seeming to understand and personally apply the high encomiums bestowed upon his daring, self-forgetful deed, for we all realized something of the

danger attending such an act. I watched him narrowly. Would his innate modesty allow him to disclaim the praise so lavishly and justly tendered?

And then he spoke, slowly, and with the inseparable drawl of the genuine Southern Negro, lapsing into the familiar speech of his childhood:

"No, I'se not a hero. Don' call me one. I'se but a po' black man. What I'se done is nuthin'. I was 'most scared white when I done got ter de window. An' a hero's nebber scared! No, I isn't one!"

But the strain had been too much, the reaction came, and an instant after the last word was uttered Niram lay unconscious at the feet of his benefactor, the general. As he was tenderly raised, the dark eyes opened slowly, and the lips parted to say:

"No, I'se not a hero. I'se jus' Niram. Dat's all."

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